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ABSTRACT

Both parents and educators have extremely important roles in educating children. Educators must consider the whole family when attempting to meet the needs of the children they teach. By means of a questionnaire, this study explored 10 preschool educators' and 10 mothers' attitudes toward parental involvement. Questions for teachers include how and how often they communicate with parents, how they perceive parental response to their outreach efforts, how they felt about surprise visits from parents, and what positive and negative experiences they had with students' parents. Questions for mothers covered areas including whether they were willing to volunteer, what were their scheduling preferences, whether they were aware of available school resources, and what kind of activities are done at home to support their children's education. Results (presented in detail for each question) indicated that teachers reach out to parents in several ways, including by newsletters and classroom visits, and that parents are willing to participate as much as possible. Teachers appear to accept certain reasons for lack of participation (in conferences, for example), and most welcome surprise visits from parents. (Includes a list of sources for parental involvement materials. Contains 18 references.) (EV)

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HOW DO EDUCATORS AND MOTHERS FEEL ABOUT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM?

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I DREAMED I STOOD IN A STUDIO

AND WATCHED TWO SCULPTORS THERE.

THE CLAY THEY USED WAS A YOUNG CHILD'S MIND,

AND FASHIONED IT WITH CARE.

ONE WAS A TEACHER, THE TOOL SHE USED

WERE BOOKS, MUSIC AND ART.

ONE WAS A PARENT WHO WORKED WITH A GUIDING HAND,

AND A GENTLE LOVING HEART.

DAY AFTER DAY THE TEACHER TOILED

WITH TOUCH THAT WAS DEFT AND SURE.

WHILE THE PARENT LABORED BY HER SIDE,

AND POLISHED AND SMOOTHED IT OVER.

AND WHEN AT LAST THEIR TASK WAS DONE,

THEY WERE PROUD OF WHAT THEY WROUGHT

FOR THE THINGS THEY MOLDED INTO THE CHILD

COULD NEITHER BE SOLD NOR BOUGHT

AND EACH AGREED SHE WOULD HAVE FAILED

IF SHE HAD WORKED ALONE

THE PARENT AND THE SCHOOL

THE TEACHER AND THE HOME

(AUTHOR UNKNOWN)

The purpose of this article is to explore Parental Involvement in an Early Childhood Classroom and stress the importance of it. The focus will be the perception of parental involvement, from the perspective of both educators and parents. Information sources for parental involvement material's will be included.

INTRODUCTION

What constitutes Parental Involvement:

There is not a simple, single definition for parental involvement because this umbrella term could be used to describe any number of parent/teacher interactions. Involved parents demonstrate support and/or active participation. There are varying levels in which parents can be involved in their children's education. Some parents are both supportive and willing to actively participate. Parents at this level take part in workshops and are responsive to Parent outreach attempts. Other parents may not feel as comfortable becoming active participants, but still care about the education of their children. Parents at this level often appreciate suggestions for ways of reinforcing material at

home. Unfortunately, there are parents who participate in all school activities; however, they do not support their children at home where it is necessary. Finally, there are some parents who are extremely difficult to reach. Parents, at this level are preoccupied with their own issues and have little energy for involvement in their children's education (Vandergraft & Greene, 1993, p.19).

Parents Views' of Parental Involvement:

Families today are faced with many daily challenges. Many parents suffer the financial and social strains that could hinder their abilities to become involved in the education of their children as much as they would like to. Most parents today are forced to join the work force to survive. Very few parents can afford the opportunity to stay at home with their young children. Many parents are single, divorced or widowed and living at the survival level. Many of current parent outreach strategies assume parents are available during school hours and have extra time to commit to their child's school. In order to provide these busy parents with the opportunity for them to take part in the education of their children, options that consider individual parental needs must be explored (Nedler, 1977).

Some parents believe, what educators identify as parental involvement, is really just a term used for one-sided teacher communication. They feel teachers do their jobs, while ignoring

concerns of parents (Pipho, 1994, p.270). They often do not feel that parents are valued as partners in the education of their children. Many are intimidated because of their own negative experiences with school and some feel that educators look down upon them.

Educators View of Parental Involvement:

Schools often become frustrated when their parental outreach attempts are not welcomed by the most needy parents. The parents that are the hardest to reach are the ones with personal struggles, whether they be financial or emotional. Teachers have begun to expect low turnout from parents of children at the poverty level (Peterson & Warnsby, 1993, p.23).

Many programs do not really want parents involved. Although they proclaim the importance of parental involvement, they never provide ways for parents to become meaningfully involved. Very often, parents are only called in to discuss problems concerning their children. Even when parents do get invited, too often, educators do not plan according to parental needs and concerns (Comer, 1986, p.444).

Often it is much easier to blame others for failures, rather than face the challenges of meeting the needs of students and their parents. Some educators believe that parents do not provide support for the education of their children. Some educators complained that parents did not even show up for conferences.

Educators feel that only negative information about education is reported in the media (Pipho, 1994, p.270). Educators complained of parents sending their children to school, regardless if they were ill. They said that parents were often late to pick up their children and needed to be constantly asked for tuition payment. Very often educators look down upon parents who are young, nonwhite and/or poor (Pizzo, 1993, p.271).

Importance of Parental Involvement:

Most educational leaders believe that parental involvement does matter and is important (Greenberg,1989, p.61). They feel that with the parents involved in their children's schooling, it helps build children's self esteem and can boost their regard for themselves as learners. Some also feel that it can help reduce discipline problems. When a member of a child's family takes part in his/her school life in a positive manner, even briefly and infrequently, the child's self-esteem appears to soar (Greenberg, 1989, p.70). Such positive participation sends a signal to the child that makes them want to strive for the best. From the perspective of the ecological or social systems theory, one would expect parents, day care teachers and children to be involved in a complex web of interrelationships, such that each influences and is influenced by the other (Ispa, 1988). With this connection, a strong bond is built and is complicated to be broken.

Given the complexity of the modern world, today's students

need more adult help than children did in the past, says Dr. Comer, 1986. Programs that involve parents effectively in the schools can provide a desirable context for teaching and learning.

One productive and cost effective way of involving parents is having them work or volunteer at the program. An important policy to have is an "open door" policy. Parents should be allowed to make unannounced visits at any time. Teachers should send home frequent activity reports to keep parents informed of classroom happenings. Programs should provide useful workshops based on the need of parents (Louv, 1994). Parent handbooks and dialogue journals can be a useful form of parental involvement. Parents should be included in establishing and evaluating parental involvement goals (Schurr, 1993, p.5). Both parents and educators have extremely important roles in educating children. Parents and educators need to get to know each other in order to develop a trusting, respectful relationship (Newman, 1995, p.81). In today's society, educators must consider the whole family when attempting to meet the needs of the children they teach.

METHOD

Subjects: Ten Early Childhood Educators and ten mothers of young children served as subjects in this study. The teacher researchers chose these subjects because at this level, parental involvement is crucial for child development. Ten educators and ten mothers were

randomly selected from a Pre-school in Bronx, New York, and from a Pre-school in Scarsdale, New York. The educators who served as subjects were all Pre-school educators. 20% were between the ages of 18-23, 30% were between the ages of 24-29, and 50% ranged from the ages of 35 and over. 50% of the educators were married and 50% were single. The ethnic background of the educators were primarily Caucasian at 90%, and the remaining 10% were African American. As for the mothers who served as subjects, 40% were between the ages of 24-29, 20% were between the ages of 30-34, and 40% were between the ages of 35 and over. The marital status of the mothers who were surveyed were 10% single, 80% married, and 10% separated. The ethnicity of the mothers varied: 50% were Caucasian, 40% were Hispanic, and only 10% were African American. 60% of the mothers had a college education, while the other 40% had some college experience. The subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire to the best of their ability. The subjects were not asked to sign their names on the questionnaire and they were given ample time to complete them. We requested that they return the completed questionnaire to us personally, one week later. We thanked them in advance for their input and cooperation.

Materials: In this study, questionnaires were randomly distributed to both educators and mothers of young children. Twenty questionnaires and twenty pencils were handed out to the subjects. In addition to the results of questionnaires, this article includes

a poem (author unknown) that stress the importance of parent/teacher involvement, and a list of resource materials on parental involvement, to help parents and teachers.

Procedure: The questionnaires given to the educators contained seventeen questions, five multiple choice and twelve open ended questions. The questions focused on their perspective of parental involvement. The questionnaire given to the mothers contained fifteen questions, four multiple choice and eleven open ended questions. Their questions were also about their perception of parental involvement. These questionnaires were distributed during the morning before school hours.

RESULTS

Responses From Educators:

1. **How many of your own children do you have?** - 50% did not have any of their own children, 20% had two, and 30% had more then two.
2. **How long have you been teaching?** - 40% have been teaching one to four years, 20% have been teaching five to ten years, and 40% have been teaching ten or more years.
3. **How and how often do you communicate with parents?** - 50% communicate daily, 10% communicate several times a week and 40% communicate weekly. 70% communicate through letters and phone calls, while 30% did not specify, although they do communicate.

4. How do you reach out to parents and try to involve them in your classroom? - 80% explained how they reached out to parents through classroom visits, parent volunteers, newsletters, conferences, and trips, while 20% did not respond to the question.

5. How would you describe response to your parent outreach? - 70% had positive feelings using descriptive words such as: excellent, very strong, very good, and positive, 20% describes parents responses as ambivalent and 10% said not very positive, only a few parents are responsive to outreach.

6. What do you feel are the most important things parents can do to help their children succeed in school? - Suggestions were as follows:

a) Reinforce what is taught in school

b) Talk to your children

c) Make sure your child gets a good nights rest

d) Feed them nutritiously

e) Reading to them and asking questions

f) Except child for who he/she is

g) Support the teacher in school

h) Love and praise them

i) Let them explore and be independent

j) Emphasize the process not just the product

k) Play guessing and number games

7. How do you feel about surprise visits from parents? - 80% welcomed surprise visits from parents. They felt that it was a good opportunity for parents to observe and get a better view of the program and the teacher. 40% out of the 80% were concerned about the negative effect, the surprise visits, might have on the child. 20% of the 80% stated that, although they did not mind surprise visits they would prefer individual meetings and conferences to be scheduled at designated times. On the other hand the remaining 20% of the educators felt negatively about surprise visits. They stated that they were disruptive and made the teacher feel apprehensive and unprepared.

8. Do you provide parents with ideas to extend or reinforce concepts learned in school? - 90% of the educators said they provide parents with ideas, through newsletters, reading materials, conferences, and by discussing the curriculum and how the children learn. 10% admitted that they did not, but knew they should.

9. What kinds of workshops, orientations or training, if any, are offered to parents of students in your program? - Suggestions were as follows:

a) Meetings

b) ESL

c) Behavior management

d) Seminars

e) Parent/teacher night

f) Orientation to program and curriculum

9a. How would you rate attendance and participation of parents? - 20% rated attendance excellent or terrific, 30% rated attendance fair between 75% and 85%, 20% stated that 50% of the parents participated and 20% rated attendance to be poor, less then 25%, stating that it was always the same parents and 10% did not respond to the question.

10. What do you feel are legitimate reasons for parents to miss parent/teacher conferences? - Suggestions were as follows:

a) Illness

b) Work

c) Young children at home with no available baby-sitter

d) Transportation difficulties

e) They go to school themselves

Teachers also stated that parents should make advance preparations to appear at conferences and encourage parents to reschedule missed conferences. Teachers agree that if parents maintained regular contact and respond to other forms of outreach, conference may not be necessary.

11. Please describe your most positive experience with a parent of one of your students. - 80% of the educators' experiences were various positive experiences.

Suggestions were as follows:

a) Working hard to reach parents

b) Thank you poem about sons progress

c) Following up on home suggestions

d) Recommending a parent volunteer for a teaching position

e) Positive referral from a parent of a former student

f) Parent telling you that you have influences his/her desire for books.

g) A parent of a difficult student told the teacher's child that she loves the teacher and school and has made such progress

h) Parent involvement in students' play, production

20% had no responses.

12. Have you had any negative experiences involving parents in your students' education? - The 80% who responed yes list their negative experiences as follows:

a) Parents not responding to notes and withholding information on the telephone

b) Parents not understanding that children learn through play

c) Parent unable to accept child's individual needs

d) A parent came in the classroom, with a stick, to beat the child

e) Parent asking "Is my child the smartest one in class"

f) Parent wants their child to have their own props, bikes,

toys in school and he even brought weapons to school

g) Parents having a difficult time accepting daily occurrences, such as sand in shoes, and accidents

h) Parent in denial of child's disability and did not want the child to participate in a modified curriculum

Response From Mothers:

1. **How many children do you have?** - 40% of the mothers have one child, 40% of the mothers have two children and 20% have three children.

2. **Are you employed?** - 50% of the mothers work full time, from that 50%, 20% are self employed, and 70% work in various corporations and/or small firm type offices. From the remaining 50% of the mothers, 40% work part time and 10% are housewives.

3. **What are the best available times to talk with your child's teacher?** - 40% of the mothers feel that the best available time to talk to their child teacher is before school, while 60% feel that it is better after school.

4. **Would you be willing to volunteer time in your child's classroom?** - 100% of the mothers would be willing to volunteer time in their child's classroom.

5. **Are you willing and able to take part on class trips?** - 100% of the mothers are willing and able to go on class trips with their

child.

6. Are you aware of any resources available to you through your child's school? - 70% of the mothers were aware of any type of resources that are available to them through their child's school. They describe them as follows:

a) Letters

b) Calendars

c) Book clubs

d) Workshops

e) Parents meetings

The other 30% were unaware of such materials.

7. Are you home when your child arrives home from school? - 50% of the mothers are home when their child arrives home form school and 50% are not.

7a. What kind of activities do you provide for your child? - 100% of the parents provide some sort of activities for their children **After School:** 50% of the children rest and watch T.V., 10% take gymnastic class, 20% have play dates, and 20% play with their siblings.

Before Dinner: 40% of the children help their parents set the dinner table and prepare dinner, while the other 60% play with their computer.

After Dinner: 40% help clean up the dinner table, 30% play games,

and 30% go right to sleep.

8. In what way do you talk to your child about his/her day? - 100% of the mothers, upon their arrival at school, ask them what was done in school that day. Types of questions they asked were as follows:

a) What did you have for snack today?

b) How was music?

c) Did you play with the blocks?

d) Did you learn any new songs today?

e) Did you play in the playground today?

9. In what way do you talk with your child about his/her teacher? -100% of the mothers ask their child about his/her teacher in a positive way.

10. How Would you best describe your involvement in your child's education? - 100% of the mothers feel that it is very important to be involved in their child's education. They all said that they were greatly involved. Many of the mothers through research, make sure that their child is in a safe and pleasant atmosphere. They make sure that the school meets both the child's and the parent's potential. Positive reinforcement must also be a key factor and one of the most important, was that the classroom was to be multi-cultural. All mothers said that they will continue this type of involvement throughout their child's school years.

DISCUSSION

The results of the questionnaire validate that relationships between teachers and parents are extremely important in the early childhood classroom. The teachers surveyed reached out to parents in several ways, including newsletters and classroom visits. From the responses of the questionnaires, we can conclude that parents are willing to participate in their child's education as much as they possibly could.

Parents today deal with varying factors that must be considered. Although most parents work different hours, most approaches to parents involvement assume parents are available at the same time. Of the parents surveyed, 40% of them felt meeting the teacher before school was best, while 60% preferred after school meetings. Educators must know when, where and how to communicate with the parents of the children they teach (Nedler, 1977, p. 129).

One effective way to involve parents is to have dialogue journals for communication between parent and teacher (Schurr, 1993, p.7). 70% of the educators surveyed reported that they communicated with the parents of their students through notes and phone calls. It is a school's obligation to communicate from school to home about school's programs and child's progress, through letters, memos, phone calls, newsletters and conferences (Hollifield, 1993 p.11).

Negating the statement that teachers often adopt low expectations for parent participation (Peterson, C & Warnsby, 1993 p.23), teachers responses show they feel that there are some legitimate reasons for missing Parent/Teacher conferences. Many of the educators believed that some acceptable excuses were illness, work, school, younger children at home with no available baby-sitter, and transportation difficulties.

80% of the educators surveyed welcomed surprise visits from parents. They felt it was a good opportunity for parents to observe and get a better view of the program. Unscheduled visits are necessary to establish and maintain trust between educators and parents (Lov, 1994, p.81). Only 20% of the educators felt negatively about surprise visits. They said they were disruptive and made the teachers feel apprehensive and unprepared. One educator even said that unannounced visits made her feel as if she were being checked up on. There must be mutual understanding, respect and trust between educators and parents (Seeley, D. 1990, p.296).

WHERE TO OBTAIN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT MATERIALS

Information Service
NAEYC
1834 Connecticut Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC. 20009
1-202-232-8777 or 1-800-424-2460

National coalition for parent involvement in education
National Education Association
1201 16th street, N.W., room 810
Washington, DC. 20036

National Committee for citizens in Education
10840 Little Patuxent Parkway #301
Columbia, MD. 21044-2396
1-800-638-9675

National Congress of Parents and Teachers
(National PTA)
700 n. Rush street
Chicago, Il. 60611
1-312-787-0977

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